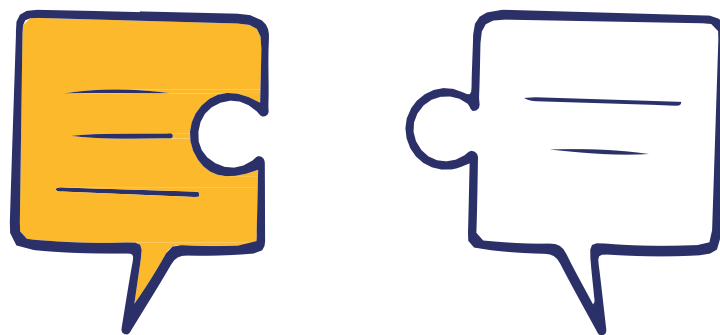




Unity and Strength: Banner Making as a Tool to Enhance Belonging and Community Cohesion

Ruth Flanagan, The University of Manchester

Community Innovation Practitioner Case Study

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Summary

Using creative collaboration as its foundation, this research explored how Rochdale's history can be harnessed to strengthen shared belonging. Drawing on the legacy of the Rochdale Co-operative Movement and heritage craft practices, the work explored how banner making can be used as a tool to promote resilience and cultural engagement. It also highlighted the continuing importance of intangible cultural heritage in shaping cultural identity across the borough.

Delivered through this Community Innovation Practitioner (CIP) programme, this work brought together [Cartwheel Arts](#), [Creative Manchester](#) at The University of Manchester and [Heritage Crafts UK](#) as partners to explore how heritage crafts, embedded within communities and supported by Greater Manchester's devolved policy context, can contribute to [good growth](#). This ensures more people can contribute to, and benefit from, economic success by combining both asset and place-based approaches.

Together, a diverse group of women explored their shared heritage through textiles relating to Rochdale's cotton history with embroidery traditions from their countries of origin and their individual experiences of passing down craft skills between generations. Together, they co-designed and embroidered a banner inspired by the Co-operative movement banners which are held in the [Touchstone's archive](#). This collaborative process fostered new relationships, strengthened cultural connections, and improved awareness of local cultural assets, demonstrating how heritage craft can support more inclusive communities.



Rochdale Town Hall

Introduction

Rochdale is a diverse and changing borough with a rich history shaped by textiles, migration and as the birthplace of the Cooperative movement. As part of the devolved Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), it is experiencing significant investment in culture, heritage and regeneration, including recognition as an Arts Council England [Priority Place](#).

Despite this, communities can remain disparate. This research moves beyond narratives of deprivation to celebrate Rochdale's shared heritage. Textile crafts provide a powerful way to connect residents, linking the town's industrial past with the diverse cultural traditions of its communities today, whilst building skills and pride in place.

The research entitled *Unity and Strength* prioritised partnership working and co-creation from inception. Participants were active collaborators and co-researchers by documenting personal histories, selecting symbolic representations, and collectively developing recommendations for cultural policy.

Through embroidery techniques, the participants engaged in open discussion, shared learning, and co-ownership of the project. Participants were welcomed regardless of previous experience or language barriers and came from a range of age groups and backgrounds, including British, Pakistani, Iranian, and Afghan heritage, creating an environment where different experiences and perspectives are shared through collective making.

This work built on a previous project which I led, [Crafting Heritage](#), a two-year exploration and celebration of rich heritage crafts amongst Rochdale's diverse communities who have been shaped by forced migration.



Research Context

Greater Manchester's rich and diverse heritage is creative, industrial, and political. It is also an area with deep-seated regional inequalities, both compared to the rest of the country and within the city region itself. In 2014, the ten boroughs of Greater Manchester formed the devolved Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA). Rochdale is one of these ten boroughs, experiencing both the opportunities and challenges of devolution. It is a diverse area, with ethnic minorities [comprising 26% of the population](#). The town has been shaped by its industrial textile heritage and the birth of the Co-operative movement.

Cultural devolution has given Rochdale a greater opportunity to shape cultural priorities and investment locally, recognising culture, heritage and creativity as tools to strengthen wellbeing and community voice.

For Rochdale, this means moving beyond deficit-based approaches and celebrating local assets—including its textile heritage, co-operative history and multicultural communities.

For devolution to be impactful, this group were given a genuine role in shaping the decisions that affect them through co-production and shared power.

Using creative collaboration as a foundation, this research explored how Rochdale's heritage could be harnessed to create opportunities for people to build relationships and participate in civic life. Through engagement with the history and legacy of Rochdale's Co-operative Movement, alongside craft-based practices, the project examined how creativity can support resilience, cultural engagement and belonging. It also highlighted the continued importance of intangible cultural heritage and faith as aspects of cultural identity for communities across the borough.

In participatory research, there is a growing shift toward [asset-based](#), [place-based models](#) that build pride, shared identity, and participation through culture, craft, and heritage. This is even more important in times of regeneration and growth, and there is an opportunity to experiment with these ideas within a devolved setting. However, communities need their voice to be heard so they can directly influence arts and culture strategies and policies that affect them.



A bee embroidered in gold representing both the Co-operative movement and the Worker Bees in Manchester Town Hall. Image Credit: Ruth Flanagan.

Community Innovation

Banners have long been used to amplify community voices in public spaces. Rochdale is the birthplace of the Co-operative movement, and [Touchstones Gallery](#) in Rochdale holds the only surviving original protest banner from the Peterloo Massacre of 1819. Connecting with this heritage enabled participants not only to share skills and stories but also to collectively articulate their vision for arts, culture and community, linking historical traditions of public voice with contemporary cultural policy.

Co-creation in the project was grounded in the shared act of making and embroidering together. Stitching provided a shared creative practice through which participants could exchange skills, stories and cultural knowledge across linguistic and cultural differences. Relationships developed through sustained making, working side-by-side around the banner frame, exchanging materials, stories and observing one another's techniques. Participants learned informally from each other, with some drawing on deep textile traditions and others approaching embroidery for the first time.



By working together, we are stronger and more knowledgeable.
Samera, Participant



Across fourteen workshops, over ten months, the group of eight women, three artists and one translator developed skills within a supportive environment that prioritised care, patience, and iterative learning. Each participant embroidered elements of the banner, gradually building a shared artwork, weaving together individual stories and collective identity. As their technical confidence grew, so too did their sense of ownership over the project.

Partnership working extended beyond the workshop. The group visited [Rochdale Town Hall](#) hosted by the Mayor, to explore civic symbols and local heritage, as well as historic cooperative movement banners at Touchstones Gallery. These visits prompted reflection on how history and identity are represented visually, directly informing the development of the banner design. They also strengthened participants' connection to local heritage and key civic spaces.



*The Pioneers Museum keeps the past of solidarity and humanity alive;
I felt that here I could shape progress.*
Zulfar, Participant



Building and sustaining a creative community required careful attention to equity and access. We worked without hierarchy, recognising researchers, artists, and participants as equal contributors. Recruitment drew on trusted relationships with community partners, ensuring participation felt safe and valued. Barriers to involvement were addressed proactively; transport costs were covered, translators provided, and co-researchers compensated with

vouchers for their time. Above all, we centred lived experience and avoided extractive practices, recognising each participant as a vital asset.

Participant reflections highlighted a growing shared connection. One participant described how the project had “*brought [her] creativity back to life*”, emphasising the importance of working collaboratively and being part of a supportive creative environment.

Collective care and mutual support became defining features of the project, illustrating how co-creation can foster belonging within the context of devolution. Participants completed their individual contributions to the banner, each selecting a symbol that reflected personal meaning and identity. These stories were documented alongside the making process. Technical learning was further enriched through collaboration with a recognised UK heritage craft practitioner, who introduced new materials and techniques in goldwork, expanding both creative confidence and practical skill.

A key moment of co-creation was the democratic naming of the banner. Drawing on the ten Cooperative values – and adding their own – the group voted collectively on the final words: Unity, Strength, Home, Diversity, and Cooperation. These values were sewn into the banner to form a message to policymakers about the principles that should guide future arts and cultural development.

The completed banner centres on a tree with strong roots, symbolising community, and shared histories. Participants selected meaningful cultural and local symbols to embroider, including a worker bee, beehive, cotton flower, Lancashire rose, and Martlet bird from Rochdale Town Hall. Others chose symbols such as a poppy for peace, a rose for beauty, an acorn for new ideas, and motifs like a Vardo rose, pomegranate, and sugar cane to represent personal heritage. The banner was unveiled at a celebratory event in Rochdale Town Hall.



Working together around the embroidery frame.
Image credit: Ruth Flanagan.

The research culminated in a Citizens' Jury, where stakeholders and local policymakers were invited to submit questions for participants to deliberate. Although policymakers were unable to attend, responses were fed back to stakeholders and academics at The University of Manchester. The jury emphasised the value of collaborative research, shared learning, and collective creativity. Participants linked collaboration to increased confidence, a desire for further engagement, and motivation to strengthen personal networks.



The mayor of Rochdale and participants discuss the meaning of each of the symbols.
Image Credit: Ruth Flanagan.

The research demonstrates that co-operation and banner-making are not simply historical artefacts – they remain vital social practices. Through shared making, skill exchange, and collective decision-making, communities can build stronger, more inclusive relationships, generating deeper and more lasting impact than isolated activities could achieve.

Results & Change

Through Unity and Strength, we have created opportunities to inform conversations about cultural policy and ensured that the perspectives and experiences of a diverse cross-section of women living in Rochdale could inform policies that directly impact their lives.

As an artist, researcher and creative producer, this work has enabled me to develop and consolidate my skills, professional knowledge, and cross-sector networks. The Community Innovation Practitioner (CIP) award has strengthened my leadership in co-created practice and deepened my understanding of research impact by integrating community-based creative practice with national policy conversations.

This research has demonstrated how heritage craft skills can be activated and shared as a tool for building cohesion and creating connections within a devolved, place-based context. Through the participants, we have opened cultural assets to new audiences, enabling people to recognise spaces such as Rochdale Town Hall, the Rochdale Pioneers Museum, The Whitworth, and the Touchstones archive as community assets that belong to them.

Greater Manchester and Rochdale have a solid foundation of arts, culture, and heritage strategies. The Greater Manchester Strategy itself recognises that power and decision-making are not always representative of the communities they serve. This project responded to that challenge by exploring how diverse voices can be included through more creative, effective, and accessible approaches.

This work has contributed to conversations about neighbourhood priorities and community connection by supporting a mixed-heritage group of women in Rochdale to share knowledge and to influence discussions about cultural policy. It demonstrated how creative participation can support more equitable forms of local decision-making in which lived experience is recognised as expertise.

Several participants reflected on how empowering it felt to try something new within a safe and welcoming environment. One participant explained that she wanted to give back to Rochdale through the project, while another, speaking through a translator, shared that although she had initially felt nervous about joining the group, she quickly felt welcome and included.

For The University of Manchester, the research has contributed to a deeper understanding of how universities in England's devolved regions can activate their civic mission and use culture to support communities. As Professor John McAuliffe of Creative Manchester reflects:

Ruth's work creates a soft infrastructure for community cohesion activities that contribute to the wellbeing and prosperity of all in Rochdale
Prof John McAuliffe – The University of Manchester

Within Rochdale and the wider Greater Manchester context, there is significant potential to build on this approach and continue experimenting with how cultural policy can better listen to, represent, and empower diverse communities. With sustained devolved investment, collaborative, place-based creative practice can strengthen collective agency, civic participation, and pride.

The research has been shared through The University of Manchester's Policy team to demonstrate how local and regional government can use culture, heritage, and creativity as mechanisms for sharing power, skills and knowledge. As a conclusion to this research, we call on policymakers, Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Rochdale Borough Council, funders and cultural organisations to invest in community spaces and creative programmes that enable residents to share, celebrate and shape their own heritage and cultural identities, recognising residents not only as participants but as experts, leaders and decision-makers in shaping the neighbourhoods where they live.



The final banner with symbols representing each person's heritage and democratically chosen words representing how participants would like to see arts and culture evolve in Rochdale and Greater Manchester. Image Credit: Ruth Flanagan.

Recommendations

In the pioneering borough of Rochdale, and within the devolved context of Greater Manchester, we can build on the work already underway. We can use it as a time to experiment, making it easier to listen to diverse voices. However, current approaches to funding arts and cultural projects are often deficit-based, designed to address perceived needs within particular areas. This research has purposefully shifted towards asset-based, place-based models that build community pride, shared identity, and participation through culture, craft, and heritage, allowing a diverse group of people to come together and share stories, skills, and understandings of each other's cultural heritage.

Overall, we are calling on funders to recognise that long-term investment in devolved, collaborative, creative work can build cross-cultural connections, wellbeing, belonging, and civic participation. Short-term, deficit-based funding does not enable meaningful engagement. It often fails to consider the long-term legacy of projects or the ongoing value, knowledge, and skills that creative communities generate.

Building, nurturing, and managing creative communities is a delicate balance – there should be no hierarchy between researchers, artists, and participants, with each being valued equally and recognised for their contribution. We achieved this by building upon previously established, trusted relationships with community partners to recruit participants. Barriers to access were carefully considered; as already mentioned, in this instance, we paid for transport and translators. Above all, we valued the lived experiences and voices of participants and strived to avoid extractive practices, recognising each person's contribution as an asset.

We must consider legacy as well as impact. To do this, we need to move away from project funding structures, which are usually deficit-based and uneconomical. When funding ends, the momentum, skills, and knowledge are often not retained. If funders were prepared to recognise the value of this type of work and consider longer-term or follow-on funding, it would enable a more cohesive and impactful approach.

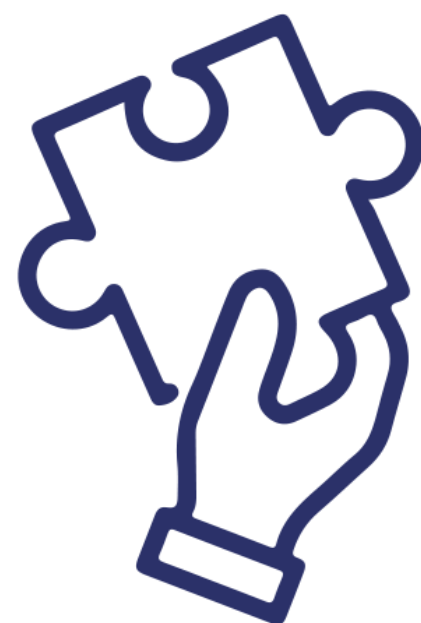
This is about continuity, keeping the project active, involving more people and making sure that the message of unity, creativity and shared experience continues into the future.

Maureen, Participant

Looking Ahead

We set out to build a creative community and explore heritage craft and banner making while discussing what arts and culture mean to residents. We have achieved much more than that; confidence has grown, friendships have formed, and embroidery skills have been shared. The women have come together as co-researchers contributing to conversations about local arts and culture policy and making recommendations for the future.

Our research demonstrates that strategic investment in collaborative heritage craft can function as a method of knowledge production and social infrastructure, enabling communities to articulate their heritage, generate shared understandings of place, and contribute to cultural decision-making. Through sustained, place-based creative activity, participants developed relationships, skills and networks that strengthened belonging, participation, and resilience. It shows how culture can become a mechanism for sharing power, recognising lived experience as expertise, and enabling communities to play a more active role in shaping the places where they live.



Further Information:

For more information on AHRC Creative Communities visit www.creativecommunities.uk

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